There are several entryways into this gospel through which I would like to lead us this
morning to discover the uniqueness of Johannine tradition. One is this enigmatic
figure The Beloved Disciple. Another is underlining the different theology,
ecclesiology and Christology in the Gospel of John. Our gospel readings will be
interspersed amid the teaching.

Just as we have differing denominations in our time, from early Christianity different
communities dealt with different issues. Different understandings of what it meant to
be church emerged immediately. The character of the Beloved Disciple is an index to
how this Johannine community was shaped. The Gospel of John also provides
scriptural underpinnings for aspects of this Total Common Ministry movement of
which we at St. Hugh are a part.

The first place the Beloved Disciple shows up is at the Last Supper:

One of the disciples – the one whom Jesus loved – was reclining next to him;
Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.
John 13:23, 24

In this picture the Beloved Disciple is physically close to Jesus. He seems to be a gate
keeper whom Peter has to go through to ask Jesus a question. Being close to the heart
of Jesus is a primary value in this community.

The next time we see the Beloved Disciple is after Jesus is arrested. The scripture says:

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known
to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard with the high priest, but
Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to
the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought
Peter in. John 18:15-17

In the Synoptic Gospels, only Peter goes into the courtyard. In this incident, the
Beloved Disciple is not only the more intimate friend of Jesus, but he also has more
clout than Peter with the temple hierarchy.

Then we have the grueling scene at the cross, where the evangelist writes:

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her,
he said . . . to the disciple "here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple
took her into his own home. John 19:26, 27

It would be hard to portray a greater trust and deeper brotherhood than is written in this
event. The Beloved Disciple becomes a replacement, a stand-in for Jesus. This act is
an important one in understanding the theology of the community of the Gospel of John and how we, too, become a stand-in for Jesus.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Peter is the first among the Twelve to see the risen Jesus. But in the Gospel of John, we read the following at the empty tomb:

*Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first... (The beloved disciple) saw and believed.* John 20:3, 4,8a

Do you see what this gospel writer is doing? Very clearly he sets up a comparison between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. This gospel is undercutting the authority and primacy of Peter and is replacing it with the unnamed and yet dearly described other disciple. In this naming, we also are shown the deepest value of this community – the claim that we, too, are Beloved.

Finally in John 21:4, 7, we read:

*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus... That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

At table, at high temple, at cross, at tomb, and now at seeing the Risen Lord, the Beloved Disciple is the perceptive, faithful, trustworthy, unobtrusive friend. He stands out as different from Peter, who is the symbol of the church from which our present Pope proclaims descendency. The teachings of this iconic disciple of the Gospel of John are summed up in his name "Beloved." This Beloved community is distinct from those of both Peter and Paul.

Scholars are pretty clear that this community of the Beloved was kicked out of the Jewish fold. One commentary suggests that the relationship between the Beloved community and the rest of the nascent communities was stained with sibling rivalry. Unfortunately, the polemic against the Jews, the brothers who kicked out the community of John, has left a taint of anti-semitism which has besmirched Jewish/Christian relations for centuries.

Now before I go any farther, I will face the inevitable question: Who was this Beloved Disciple? There has been much Biblical scholarship in the last century which often disagreed with ideas which had been perpetuated for years around the authorship of the various books of the Bible. Some of these outdated ideas are still found in resources as reputable as the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, which our preachers were taught to use and which we have volumes of in our St. Hugh library.

So take heed. Take a deep breath, as I may be dispelling some of your childhood ideas. The first thing it is important to know is that all of the original disciples are now believed to have died by the decade of the 60’s. That means John, the son of Zebedee,
often named as the evangelist who wrote the gospel, did not grow old on Patmos. There are conflicting stories from the earliest records as to whether the Zebedee brothers were martyred, as some ancient calendars of martyrs suggest.

Because scholars also now pretty much agree that this last gospel was written in the 90’s, and that the Johannine letters were written a decade later, we are reminded that the name of the author or evangelist does not necessarily coincide with a person still living at the time. Rather, there were communities who honored the memory of specific leaders by naming the writings after them or as though from them. So at St. Hugh, if this custom were in effect, no matter who did the theological reflection, the letters or sermons would be attributed to The Rev. Don Maddux, who founded St. Hugh, and this would be the community of Don Maddux.

To this day there is no firm consensus as to the authorship, neither of the Johannine letters and gospel, nor of the identity of the Beloved Disciple, except that it was not John the son of Zebedee. Thus it will be well to hold very lightly the idea of a white bearded John who lived into the 100’s in some mystical state.

However, can it be an accident that the writer of the gospel so successfully hid the identity of the Beloved Disciple that to this day there are numerous suggestions without agreement? Some feminists have posited that given the extraordinary number of John’s main characters who were women, and given the women who were assigned foundational roles and functions that were otherwise assigned to Peter and the Twelve in the other gospels, that it is even possible the Beloved Disciple was a woman.

Where there is agreement is that the Gospel and the letters and Revelation were written as a community endeavor with layers added from different time periods in the life of this community. The wisdom and mystical knowing indicate a community which has had time to reflect and pray upon the life and death of Jesus.

Now I want to take a different tack and return to the readings we had at the beginning comparing Peter and the Beloved Disciple. There is evidence that the theology of the community of this unnamed figure and the theology of the congregations stemming from the teachings of Peter and Paul are quite different in significant ways – ways which might help us thread through our own modern-day thinking about Christ and the church.

Much of late 19th and early 20th century theology taught that there is a chasm between God and humanity which can never be crossed – God is always "other." Atonement theology is a core belief in this theology – that there is some break between God and human which only blood-sacrifice can put right. That theology is not the theology of this gospel. Union with Jesus and thus with the Father and thus with the community is the truth, the reality of existence in this gospel. God comes to us in Jesus and we come
to God in Jesus – there is a meeting of human and divine which is of this time and place. Let us now sing a hymn reflecting this theology:

**Hymn – Come Down, O Love Divine**

Now, let me introduce some terms:

**Ecclesiology** – *Ecclesia* = church – ecclesiastical (not secular), *ology* - *logos* = words; so, words and theology about the church.

Paul’s image: The church as the body of Christ. He stresses the corporate nature of church. His theology relates to specific communities and their problems.

John’s images: "I am the Vine" - "I am the Shepherd" - "I am the Way" are "being" images rather than function or action images. Theology seems to come out of mystical reflection. The believers are not identified by their gifts but rather by their individual relationship to Jesus; a relationship so close that Jesus and the believer are one in one another.

Raymond Brown, one of the scholars I’ve been reading for this teaching, suggests that the Johannine churches had a low ecclesiology whereas the Pauline/Petrine traditions developed a high ecclesiology. (In seminary there was a saying: "high and crazy, low and lazy, broad and hazy" which jokingly generally referred to style of liturgy. In this teaching I am more interested in church polity and theology.)

High ecclesiology is marked by a well-developed structure, order, and doctrine about the church. There is a focus on the institutional and the functional. There is a proper way of doing things – different roles - apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, according to Paul. At St. Hugh we have morphed from having two bodies, the Bishop’s Committee and the Circle for Ministry Support to having one Council of Ministries as a way of ordering our gifts.

Every theology has its strengths and weaknesses. By the time we get to Timothy in the second century, Paul’s ecclesiology about the body of Christ has become a pyramid with authority vested in the clerics and with women’s roles constricted. We at St. Hugh are pioneers in the contemporary reformation about aspects of high ecclesiology, since we don’t place our clergy as being somehow closer to God than the rest of the baptized.

In the low ecclesiology of John, it is not the role which is important but the movement of the Holy Spirit. The glue or defining attribute is love. By not ever naming the Beloved Disciple, is the Evangelist leveling the field so the only "person" to look up to is Jesus?
The distinctions of identity, role, and gift are secondary to being the Beloved. There is no leadership by office; only the direction of the Holy Spirit. The Paraclete, the Comforter, seems more personal and intertwined with Jesus in the Gospel of John. Direct experience and personal relationship are primary in low ecclesiology. In our day, the Cursillo Movement illustrates a renewal of the thirst for personal, emotional worship and theology. As well, Centering Prayer and contemplative circles are moving back to an important center in many renewal churches as a way for believers to encounter the divine through direct experience.

Unfortunately, the "Beloved" communities were forged in competition with the founding synagogue and other forms of Christianity. Although love is the primary value, it became love for one another and hatred for those not in the community. Without some sense of church order, with the sole emphasis on a personal experience of Jesus, and with no process for how succession and leadership evolved, the "Beloved" churches disintegrated into schismatic groups, each claiming the Holy Spirit as their guide.

Can you see the challenge for our little church here? We want to honor the gifts of each member (the body of Christ image), which involves offices, roles and clergy. Yet, we do not want to be boxed-in and unable to respond to the Holy Spirit because all the authority seems to rest with certain people. Our recent discernment about the landscaping is one way we seek to give equal voice to each person as a vessel of the Holy Spirit.

A final major difference I want to look at is the fact that John does not have an institution of the Eucharist which is found in Paul and the Synoptics. The central event for John is not the "take, bless, break, give" Eucharistic action of I Corinthians or of the other gospels. The central event is the footwashing. Have you noticed that before? Yes, Jesus gathers at Passover-time with the disciples, but his teachings are not about the Eucharist but inter-relationships of "being." Listen to the flavor of the teachings on that last night:

As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, as we are one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23

If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him. John 14:7

The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. John 14:26
These readings foretell a direct experience of the indwelling of Christ which happens in this realm. Rather than speak of the sacramental nature of the Eucharist, Jesus gets down on his knees in relationship to the members of his community. The sacrament is within the individual and within the community. Our bodies are the chalice.

Here is another example of how Jesus breaks down hierarchy: He washes their feet and tells them they are now his friends. There is no chasm between us and God. God is not other. God is us. It is in service to one another that Christ continues to live. This theology is called realized eschatology. The eternal is now, right here. We don’t have to wait. Jesus is in us, we are in him, the Spirit is Jesus, is in us, right here, right now.

The cross is not an act of atonement to a far-away God. The cross is an act of service offered out of divine love for humanity. By the way, Our clergy here have changed the Eucharistic prayer a bit to reflect realized eschatology. They say, "Christ lives for us" rather than, "Christ died for us."

In reviewing the distinct theology of John and the mystery of the Beloved Disciple, my hope is that we understand that diversity, differences, and misunderstandings have been in the fabric of the Christian cloak from early times. Each age, as well as each individual, is called to embody Christ in different ways. What the community of the Beloved Disciple teaches us is the starting place, by knowing we are grafted onto the tree of life, the vine of Jesus/God, through love. None of our names, offices, or roles is our definitive identity. Our true self is infinite and is named at our baptism – Remember, you are the Beloved with whom God is well pleased.

Barnhart, Bruno: *The Good Wine, Reading John From the Center*
Brown, Raymond E.: *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*
Brown, Raymond E.: *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*
Bruteau, Beatrice: *The Holy Thursday Revolution*
Schneiders, Sandra: *Written That You May Believe - Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*